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ABSTRACT

It is a challenge in areas of teacher education to find relative and meaningful classroom methods to teach educational theories and practices. Often, when preservice and inservice teachers are presented with educational theory, they resist absorbing its value because of disconnection with their personal experiences. Specifically, public theory does not always take into account the private individual and the individual's life events that influence the manner in which theories are digested and accepted. In order to combat this dilemma, researchers suggest the adaptation of teachers' stories or personal history methodologies within teacher education programs. Personal history methodologies possess many advantages: they offer teachers a voice in their education; they validate and legitimize their experiences; they provide an opportunity for differentiated instruction; and they offer an opportunity for reflection. Although the personal history has many advantages to teacher educators and students, researchers also warn of their limitations and suggest pedagogical approaches that can counter these confines. Just as personal history methodologies have been initiated within preservice education program, so too should they be adapted for inservice education so that teachers can reap the benefits of this instructional approach in order to inform and analyze their teaching practices. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/SM)

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Interpreting Teachers' Stories to Inform Teacher Education Practices:

A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

It is a challenge in areas of teacher education to find relative and meaningful classroom methods to teach educational theories and practices. Often, when preservice and inservice teachers are presented with educational theory, they resist absorbing its value because of its disconnection with their personal experiences. Specifically, public theory does not always take into account the private individual and the individual's life events that influence the manner in which theories are digested and accepted. In order to combat this dilemma, researchers suggest the adaptation of teachers' stories or personal history methodologies within teacher education programs. Personal history methodologies possess many advantages: (a) they offer teachers a voice in their education; (b) they validate and legitimize their experiences; (c) they provide an opportunity for differentiated instruction; and (d) they offer an opportunity for reflection. Although the personal history has many advantages to teacher educators and students, researchers also warn of their limitations and suggest pedagogical approaches that can counter these confines. Just as personal history methodologies have been initiated within preservice education programs, so too should they be adapted for inservice education so that teachers can reap the benefits of this instructional approach in order to inform and analyze their teaching practices.

Interpreting Teachers' Stories to Inform Teacher Education Practices: A Review of the Literature

Teaching must be viewed, in part, as an intensely personal affair. This suggests that prospective teachers be given the concepts and methods to delve into their own biographies, to look at the sedimented history they carry around, and to learn how one's cultural capital represents a dialectical interplay between private experience and history. (Giroux, 1982, p. 158)

Filling in the Gaps: The Importance of Personal Histories in Teacher Education

Teaching is a personal matter. In fact, teaching and learning to teach are so highly personal that these activities become inextricably linked to one's life history (Sikes & Troyna, 1991). Goodson (1992) asserted "that researchers had not confronted the complexity of the schoolteacher as an active agent making his or her own history" (p. 4). Instead, too often, educators and educational researchers strive to find teacher-proof educational models that purport to solve complex problems in complex situations, causing a crisis in the teaching profession. Unfortunately, these models do not take into account the personal influences that already have affected the teacher and his or her identity:

> The crisis in professional knowledge, related to the foregoing problems of scholarship, finds its root cause within a preoccupation with the discovery or invention of sure-fired models which would guarantee generalizable problem solutions. This preoccupation with prescription has led to the formation of bodies of professional knowledge which have been largely ignored by professionals-in-action since they have found that little of this prescriptive technology is

> appropriate to specific situations whose nature is uniquely personal, instinctive, intuitive, reflective and practical. (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992, p. 53)

Teacher educators should first recognize that teachers influence classroom instruction as active and reflective practitioners in the classroom, and simultaneously, teachers' actions are influenced and shaped by their personal histories. Connelly and Clandinin asserted that teacher educators should not view preservice teachers as mere recipients of knowledge, but instead, teacher educators should shift paradigms in order "to understand teachers as knowers: knowers of themselves, of their situations, of children, of subject matter, of teaching, of learning" (p. 1). Similarly, Carter and Doyle (1995) warned that "it is quite unwise to continue to ignore preconceptions and attempt to educate teachers as if they were blank slates or pliable lumps of clay" (p. 190); they advocated finding methodologies and approaches that support the nurturing of personal meaning making in the teaching practice.

Because of the highly personal nature of teaching, preservice teachers often discard what they learn in teacher education programs once they enter the classroom; simply stated, the material they learn in their programs seems disconnected to their lives and their experiences (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Sikes & Troyna, 1991). Bullough and Gitlin (1995) stated that often curricula, public theory, personal theory, and practice seem fragmented, disconnected, and in conflict with each other. According to Sikes and Troyna (1991), student teachers "tend to accept and internalize those parts of their professional education which support, strengthen and confirm their ideal, and reject those which do not" (p. 7). Butt, Raymond, and Townsend (1990) asserted that both positive and

negative events during schooling experiences profoundly shape the way teachers approach their own classrooms:

> What teachers are conscious of in many cases within their own schooling, however, are the personal characteristic, pedagogical styles, and relationships with their least and most favourite teachers. Past teachers, least and most favourite subjects and levels of success appear to influence many teachers' educational choices throughout school and in higher education. As well, many teachers still carry images of past teachers with them (positive and negative) to influence how they develop and teach many years later. (p. 11)

Knowles' (1988) account of a beginning English education teacher supported this notion in that the teacher was deeply influenced by positive and negative experiences with classroom teachers prior to her actually becoming a teacher herself. Knowles concluded with the following thought for teacher educators:

> By not accommodating and dealing with the autobiography of teacher in training, future beginning teachers are bound to become teachers who teach as they were taught; individuals whose professional growth may even be stunted. (p. 712)

In other words, preservice teachers use their pre-existing definitions of "good teaching" as their benchmark of what to accept and reject as they confront educational theory in coursework in an effort to make sense of what they learn (Holt-Reynolds, 1992).

The dilemma is not limited to preservice teachers: "In-service education has disregarded the teacher as an active learner and has based its interventions on less than adequate, if any, conceptions of how learning occurs" (Butt, Raymond, McGue, & Yamagishi, 1992, p. 53). How, then, can teacher educators make educational theories

sound and applicable for the teacher? What method can teacher educators provide to help the teacher latch on and grasp seemingly decontextualized theories? Personal histories provide such a medium.

The Advantages of Teachers' Stories in Teacher Education Programs

The expressing, writing, and acknowledging of personal histories and their relationship to an understanding of theory offer many advantages to teacher educators. Although the terminology in the literature varied on this topic from autobiographies to personal histories to teachers' stories, in the context of this review, teachers' stories refers to written narratives of life events that occurred in educational contexts that have influenced an individual's views on learning, school environments, and teaching. The primary advantage of using teachers' stories in teacher development programs is that the methodology offers individuals the opportunity to have a voice in their education. Recognition of life history and its influences offers teachers empowerment. Goodson (1992) suggested that seeking and hearing teachers' voices intimates that teachers are being taken seriously in their profession. Thus, he asserted that educational research and practice should be reconceptualized in order "to assure that the teacher's voice is heard, heard loudly, and heard articulately" (p. 10). Essentially, this hearing of teachers' voices and recognition of their life histories could prompt educational reform: "Studying teachers' lives will provide a valuable range of insights into the new moves to restructure and reform schooling, into new policy concerns and directives" (p. 11). Goodson (1997) also noted an irony in educational practice; while educators begin to understand the value of the teacher's voice in educational arenas, "the teacher's work is being technised and narrowed" (p. 111). As a result, in spite of the advantages of recognizing the influence of

teachers' life histories, Goodson (1992) lamented that the study of teachers' lives would "never become mainstream, for such study seeks to understand and to give voice to an occupational group that have been historically marginalized" (p. 15). Nonetheless, a study of personal history helps to combat the depersonalization of the profession.

Another advantage of the use of life history in teacher education is an awareness and appreciation of the events that have helped to form a teacher's identity. It is not classroom knowledge learned in teacher education programs that formulates a teacher's view of what successful classroom practices entail. Rather, Knowles (1992) asserted that "early childhood experiences, early teacher role models, and previous teaching experiences are most important in the formation of an 'image of self as teacher'" (p. 126). Preservice teachers are often affected in their classroom practices by their conceptions of successful teaching. Thus, it is important to detangle the web of events and experiences that have formed a beginning teacher's self-image:

> For a pre-service teacher with a negative teacher role identity when the school environment is also negative, resulting practices tend to be negative and inappropriate. Those individuals are usually ill-equipped to handle the rigours of classrooms in positive ways. (Knowles, 1992, p. 145)

An individual awareness of teacher self-image through an exploration of life history allows beginning teachers cognitively and decisively to take control of complex situations without being influenced by former preconceived notions based on past experiences.

In many teacher education programs, educators promote the development of reflective practitioners. Typically, however, it is difficult to find an authentic assignment

that will develop reflective skills. According to Bullough and Gitlin (1995), it is not enough to simply tell a preservice teacher to "think hard." Instead, an instructional medium should be used which requires reflection in the nature of the assignment itself. Bullough and Gitlin view the personal history as such a medium:

> To be reflective means that careful attention is given to individual experience and how meaning is made and justified, and to the analysis of the constraining and enabling influence of contexts and how they shape human relations. (p. 16)

Through an honest analysis of personal history and its links and connections to public theory, educators "can expose the relationship between the technical concerns of teachers and the personal, ethical, and political dimensions of teaching which are so often neglected" (p. 17), thereby encouraging active reflection in the learner. Mattingly (1991) asserted that "storytelling and story analysis can facilitate a kind of reflecting that is often difficult to do, a consideration of those ordinarily tacit constructs that guide practice" (p. 236). Sikes and Troyna (1991) viewed the study of personal histories within teacher education programs as an opportunity "which allows those disparate experiences to be compared, contrasted and ultimately, problematised" (p. 7). In other words, a study of the influence of personal history sparks the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills of the preservice teacher. Butt, Raymond, and Townsend (1990) noted that "through a critical and reflective appraisal of self and through exposure, comparison, and contrast with others, individual strengths, trends, and growth points may be identified" (p. 22).

Teacher educators often purport the advantages of differentiating instruction to meet the needs of the individual student. When a teacher educator uses personal history methodology in his or her curricula, differentiated instruction is explored and modeled

for the preservice teacher. The following statement supports this tenet in teacher education:

> A biographical/life history approach, however, offers the opportunity of capitalizing on these different experiences and perspectives and utilizing them as teaching resources. (Sikes & Troyna, 1991, p. 8)

Each student can use individual experiences and life events to make sense out of educational theories. Conle (1996) chronicled how she used teacher life stories in a multicultural classroom in order to focus on "encounters of difference" (p. 300), or those life events that are unique to the individual and have, thus, shaped the individual in a highly personal way.

Teachers' stories can help to bridge the gap between the practical and the theoretical. While preservice teachers frequently have a difficult time making the transition from pupil to teacher, an analysis of personal experiences offers concrete evidence of theories in practice, thus making the use of theories in practice more palpable for the preservice teacher and the transition to the classroom more manageable (Sikes & Troyna, 1991). An analysis of life history can encourage the preservice teacher to take the "how to" theories presented in teacher education programs and begin to delve into reasons for "why" by actually analyzing the theories in the context of their personal experiences. In essence, the preservice teacher has already grappled with the veracities and complexities of these educational theories in real-life settings.

Thus, it seems apparent that the incorporation of teachers' life stories in teacher education programs is advantageous. Whether empowering the teacher through offering them a voice in their education, recognizing the unique differences that have shaped their

teacher identity, or allowing moments of reflection in order to connect private experiences with public theories, the exploration of personal histories in teacher education can be a vital component in teacher education programs.

Limitations of Personal History Methodologies

In spite of the advantages of studies regarding teachers' stories and their connection to classroom practice, many shortcomings in this method as an educational medium and research design should be considered prior to initiating a program. Goodson (1997) warned that social context must be addressed when interpreting and analyzing the impact of teacher biography. In teacher history research, "content has been embraced and celebrated, context has not been sufficiently developed" (p. 114). Similarly, Goodson further stated that "stories should not only be narrated but located" (p. 113). In other words, it is not enough for educational researchers to study an individual story, but rather many stories should be collected, interpreted, and analyzed for patterns to help inform and generalize to entire teaching communities, accounting for the wider social context that may influence a particular individual's story.

Goodson (1997) also warned that, in an effort to give the individual teacher a voice, the researcher or interpreter of the story may flavor the account of events as much as the narrator. The social context of the constructor of the story may influence the actual data as much as the social context of the teller of the story. In other words, retelling of teachers' stories gives as much power to the researcher or interpreter as it gives to the teacher who is sharing his or her personal history. Again, Goodson suggested that this dilemma could be remedied by a recognition of social and historical context and a keen awareness of patterns among stories. This is not to suggest that the data must be free of

all social contexts. If that were the case, data from teachers' life stories would become contrived. Rather, the stories need to recognize the influences of social and historical context of the individual and the researcher, and they need to extend beyond the individual to society at-large in order for the stories to be of use in educational reform.

As an educator who uses teachers' stories to prompt discussion in a graduate teacher education program, N. Ares (personal communication, November 8, 2000) indicated that autobiography can be a powerful tool for effective educational practice, yet she also noted that students sometimes exploit the benefits of the method:

> One of the interesting things I've experienced with it is that the inservice teachers in my classes see it as a way that their knowledge and expertise is honored; legitimizing their application of personal theories to public theories frees them. The trick is to have them not use their experience as the litmus test for the worth of public theory, but instead to use each to inform the other.

Ares cautioned that the use of teachers' stories should not preempt a study of educational theory. Instead, the personal histories should provide a foundation for weighing, assessing, and analyzing theory, and instructors should emphasize how theory can be recognized within the practices and shared stories.

Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992) acknowledged some of the potential controversies of autobiographical methodologies in educational research: "its data are subject to incompleteness, personal bias and selective recall in the process by which the narrative is constructed" (p. 91). Similar to Ares, they expressed concern that the turning inward of the focus on teaching practices could possibly become narcissistic. In essence, Goodson (1992) agreed and stressed that the intent of biographical data is to

amass many people's accounts in order to "develop a wide intertextual and intercontextual mode of analysis." Although the data begins with the individual, the many combined stories can extend to help inform educational practices.

Applications in Teacher Education Programs

Numerous researchers and teacher educators have made recommendations regarding how to approach personal history methodologies. Goodson (1992) devoted his work Studying Teachers' Lives to exploring different approaches to autobiographical data in educational research. For instructional rather than research purposes, Bullough and Gitlin (1995) provided a framework for the use of teachers' stories in teacher education programs. Their work, Becoming a Student of Teaching: Methodologies for Exploring Self and School Contexts, offers detailed examples of assignments and pedagogical approaches to personal history methodologies. Specifically, the intent of the work is "not presenting prescriptions to be followed, but rather clusters of diverse approaches to becoming students of teaching that require intelligent adaptation, adjustment, and integration" (p. xviii).

One written assignment that Bullough and Gitlin (1995) advocated using early in a course includes the narration of a critical incident or "an event that signals an important change in course, a shift in one's thinking" (p. 28). They embed this assignment within an "education-related" context, or a context, either formal or informal, where learning occurred. Similar to this assignment, Carter and Doyle (1995) promoted the use of personal narrative papers that focus on well-remembered events that shaped their teaching practices. The account of the event should contain the following parts: (a) a description of the event; (b) a statement of the educational issues raised by the event; and

(c) a description of the meaning that the student made of the event in respect to the learning-to-teach process. Both Carter and Doyle (1995) and Bullough and Gitlin (1995) advocated the narration of a single incident in an educational context to introduce students to personal history methodologies in their teacher education programs.

After providing students' sample responses to a prompt based on a critical moment, Bullough and Gitlin (1995) provided commentary that analyzes the educational patterns and themes which emerged as a result of this assignment and how these themes were then turned into classroom discussions and instructional strategies. For instance, they suggested grouping students by themes to have them discuss the beliefs embedded in their histories in relationship to teaching, school contexts, and working conditions. The second approach they suggested was to recognize the common and universal themes which emerged in the histories and to return to the themes throughout the course of instruction in order to link public and private theories. Their third approach as a follow-up activity for this assignment included recognition of the specific and particularistic nature of the response, instead of emphasizing themes or commonalities. In essence the written response becomes a personal statement that can be referred back to during instruction to note any changes in thinking or belief systems.

As another approach to teachers' stories, Bullough and Gitlin (1995) recommended that personal history methodologies be used throughout an entire teacher education program in order to add consistency to the curriculum. In order to combat course fragmentation, content duplication, and superficial assignments, a faculty could agree on a sole reflective assignment based on personal history that follows the student throughout their entire teacher education program. Specifically, after writing initial

narratives, Bullough and Gitlin suggested that preservice teachers select a metaphor, a symbol of themselves as teacher in the classroom. Initially, the preservice teachers were asked to describe their metaphor and analyze why they had selected that particular object as a representation of their teaching identity. Later in the year, Bullough and Gitlin asked students to refer back to the metaphor and write again in response to approximately four prompts. As the years progressed, the students continued to visit the metaphor with prompts guiding their written responses. Bullough and Gitlin (1995) emphasized that "in teaching, as in life generally, metaphors are central to the process of sense making" (p. 69). Thus, through the metaphor methodology, students can explore their belief systems regarding the events of their lives that have shaped their choices about education. The common thread of revisiting this metaphor lends a sense of continuity to the overall teacher education program.

Butt, Raymond, and Townsend (1990) capitalized upon the use of small collaborative groups to allow teachers to share experiences through personal histories and autobiographies. When beginning teachers are provided opportunities to share their teaching and personal histories, they are able to make theory concrete and tangible while also providing support and solutions for the dilemmas they confront in the classroom. Ultimately, this enables teachers to "exchange and share ideas and help one another, in all sorts of ways, to provide support and encouragement" (p. 11). To prompt these networking discussions, Butt, Raymond, and Townsend (1990) have students complete exploratory writing based on the four following themes: (a) a description of their current working context; (b) a description of their current pedagogy; (c) reflections on their past personal and professional lives as they have possibly shaped their current professional

decisions; and (d) a prediction of their future career choices based on the earlier writing prompts. An individual class member presents excerpts of their life history writing to the group. The group then engages in discussion by sharing probing questions and critical analyses among members.

A plethora of suggested methodologies for personal histories exist in the literature. These different instructional practices are offered in this review as suggestions to educators in order to encourage the assessment of strengths and weaknesses of each methodology in practice. Thus, teacher educators can make adaptations to various methodologies rather than conforming to a single practice. All of the teacher educators suggest embedding the narrative or the teachers' story within an educational context in order to explore public theories. Many of the teacher educators (Conle, 1996; Butt, Raymond, & Townsend, 1990; Bullough & Gitlin, 1995) suggested using these stories as springboards for classroom discussion of educational theories or as opportunities to encourage professional networking in collaborative groups. These same teacher educators recognize the time commitment involved by students and teachers when using personal histories, yet also offer that the additional reflective time adds a sense of continuity to curricula.

Enhancing Inservice Education with Teachers' Stories

In spite of the emphasis of the advantages of exploring personal histories in teacher education programs, the movement over the last decade appears to be limited to preservice education. Although Butt, Raymond, McGue, & Yamagishi (1992) advocated the adaptation of personal histories in inservice education and explored this possibility through a graduate course with inservice teachers, few additional references can be found

in this arena. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) thoroughly researched the stories of inservice teachers and administrators in order to demonstrate "curriculum and identity shaping each other in intricate ways" (p. 92); however, they appear to use teacher stories' in an attempt to verify the complex interrelationship of knowledge, context, and identity among teachers for purely research purposes. Most likely, their research is shared within the educational community to inform theory rather than as a suggested applied methodology to inform practice for individual teachers. Thus, it appears beneficial to employ personal history methodologies in an inservice setting as well as a preservice setting.

Following many of the suggestions offered by Bullough and Gitlin (1995) inservice workshops could focus on a given educational issue, such as classroom management, critical thinking instruction, or the use of technology. Prior to being presented with educational theories, inservice teachers could write about a critical event during their teaching careers that relates to the workshop's educational issue. The events could be explored in collaborative groups in order to discern patterns in the stories of the participants. When a pattern has been noted, the participants can begin to address the public educational theories that could be explored and probed regarding the issue. Using a series of guided prompts, they can begin to discuss accepted educational beliefs in the context of the teachers' actual, practical experiences. Thus, their experiences would be honored while also providing a framework for discussion of public theories. This approach could also enable teachers to network with other inservice educators who may have shared similar experiences.

Other options for adapting this methodology in inservice education also exist. The personal history of the inservice educator could be used throughout an entire series of workshops to note change and growth in thinking and practices, using accounts of critical events to reflect back on teaching practices. Teachers' stories can be used among inservice educators to offer theories on how and why they have made certain decisions regarding curriculum and pedagogy. Teachers' stories could also be used to initiate mentoring relationships during teacher induction. Both the mentor and the beginning teacher could write personal history accounts and use these narratives as catalysts for discussion in order to validate the experiences of the veteran and beginning teacher. The possibilities of incorporating personal history methodologies in inservice education are boundless. Holt-Reynolds (1992) requested that teacher educators "consider how best to sustain and support the conversations and critiques" among teachers that are initiated within preservice programs. Personal history methodologies are presented as a means for accomplishing that goal during inservice educational programs.

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